DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 190 CS 211 284

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TITLE Dimensions of Diversity: Peer Tutoring in a Multi-Cultural Setting.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Background; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Influences; Culture Conflict; Educationally Disadvantaged; Ethnic Groups; Higher Education; Middle Class Culture; *Minority Groups; *Peer Teaching; *Social Differences; Student Characteristics; Tutoring; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS Empowerment

ABSTRACT

The writing center is a logical setting for assisting the culturally dissonant student. Although the education of ethnic minority youth is one of the major tasks confronting American society and public higher education, teaching methods remain oriented to the values of a predominantly white middle class population. As a result, non-traditional (ethnic minority and working class) students often experience cultural dissonance in the classroom, a dissonance perhaps manifested most acutely when they encounter a writing assignment. Through sensitive peer tutoring and a "hands-off" approach to writing instruction, the writing center helps to empower the non-traditional student, and provides an ideal place for students to begin to cope with the culture of academia. The recruiting and training of tutors, especially peer tutors, are key factors in the development of the writing center. In an environment with culturally diverse writers, peer tutoring develops a different value and dimension. By actively recruiting tutors who reflect the cultural, gender, and class diversity of the student population, and by training all tutors to become sensitive to stereotyping, cultural orientation, and learning styles, the writing center can address the complex experience of non-traditional students and serve a facilitating and liberating function for writers unfamiliar with academic discourse. Writings by clients and tutors at the writing center at the University of Washington reveal the success such a program can yield. (ARH)

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DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY: PEER Tutoring IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SETTING

Gail Y. Okawa

The National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities points to the educating of ethnic minority youth as one of the major tasks confronting American society and public higher education. However, teaching methods for the most part remain oriented to the values and cultural expectations of a predominantly white middle class population. As Bizzell and others have observed, non-traditional (ethnic minority and working class) students often experience cultural dissonance in the classroom, a dissonance perhaps manifested most acutely when they encounter a writing assignment.

The focus of my presentation is to establish the writing center as the logical setting for asssisting the culturally dissonant student. If we follow Stephen North's maxim to encourage better writers rather than simply to produce better writing, then the writing center is the ideal place for non-traditional students to begin to cope with the culture of academia. The recruiting and training of tutors—especially peer tutors—become key factors.

In an environment with culturally diverse writers, peer tutoring develops a different value and dimension. Hawkins has established peer tutors' effectiveness on affective levels. By actively recruiting tutors who reflect the cultural, gender, and class diversity of the student population, and by training all tutors to become sensitive to stereotyping, cultural orientations, and learning styles, the writing center can address the complex experience of non-traditional students and serve a facilitative and liberating function for writers unfamiliar with academic discourse.

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DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY:

PEER TUTORING IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SETTING

a paper presented at the Conference on College Composition
and Communication Annual Convention
March, 1988

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DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY: PEER TUTORING IN A MULTI-CULTURAL SETTING

In the November 12, 1986 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities points to the educating of ethnic minority youth as one of the major tasks confronting American society and public higher education. It cites the prediction that "racial and ethnic minorities will account for 30 per cent of all 18-22-year-olds in the United States" by 1990 (Nat'l Commission Report, 1986, 29). [This, then, is the first dimension I'd like to refer to: the number of culturally different students is growing.]

The Commission also makes the disturbing point that the rates of participation of non-Asian minority communities in higher education are declining (32): It states, for example, that

> Black college students as a percentage of black high school graduates and Hispanic college students as a percentage of Hispanic high school graduates have declined annually since 1975 . . . . The education reform movements . . . have failed dismally to address the needs of minority youth, in many cases, resulting in the uses of 'excellence' and 'quality' as code words for denial of access and opportunity to blacks, Hispanics, and other racial minorities (29).

Research within the last ten years has revealed that, because of cultural bias, standardized testing methods often skew the measurement of abilities --and, hence, access to higher education. This factor affects particularly students of color and other non-traditional disadvantaged students, and, as Zorn, White and Thomas have observed, particularly in the area of written skills (see Jeffrey L. Zorn, 1983); Edward M. White and Leon L. Thomas, 1981).

When these students ARE allowed access to universities and colleges, they encounter teaching methods which, for the most part, remain oriented around the values and cultural expectations of a predominantly Caucasian middle class population. Students of other cultural orientations are

expected of course to conform to "the system" as well as its language. Alternatively, as the NCTE 1986 Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English points out, educators may "create separate and remedial ways of teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students"; some of these ways have "impeded, rather than fostered," the intellectual and linguistic growth of such students (NCTE, 1987, 550).

Regardless of the curricular approach, many non-traditional and ethnic minority students often experience cultural dissonance in the college classroom. [Here we have a second facet of this diversity: these students are increasing in the population but don't feel comfortable in higher education.] Many are inexperienced or unfamiliar with the language and culture of academia whether they are native or non-native English speakers. These students are Mina Shaughnessy's "basic writers" (Shaughnessy, 1977); they are what Patricia Bizzell calls "outlanders," those who "to many teachers and to themselves . . . are most alien in the college community" (Bizzell, 1986, 294). Bizzell suggests that basic writers are not only "being asked to learn a new dialect and new discourse conventions, but the outcome of such learning is acquisition of a whole new world-view" (297). We in writing centers know that the dissonance created by this process is perhaps manifested most acutely when culturally diverse students encounter a writing assignment. Written in the language of the academy, it expects them to respond in kind.

The conditions in American education make the Commission's report and the recommendations of the NCTE task force critical in-put for our pedagogy and programs. The student population is growing more diverse—ethnically, culturally, linguistically; the declining admissions and retention trends

among these groups must not continue. The question remains--what can we do about it? In this context, WRITING CENTERS can provide a true alternative for the culturally (and linguistically) dissonant student. If we follow Stephen North's maxim to encourage better writers rather than simply to produce better writing (North, 1984, 438; see also Lil Brannon, 1984), then the writing center is the logical place on college campuses for non-traditional students and inexperienced writers to begin to cope with the culture of academia. To the extent that it is student centered, that it begins with the writer's perspective, that talking in a collaborative manner is valued (Kenneth Bruffee, 1973, 1984), the writing center is philosophically consistent with the goals of self-sufficiency and, ultimately, self-expression and liberation for these students.

In an environment with culturally diverse writers, peer tutoring also develops a different value and dimension. Colleagues like Thom Hawkins, Kenneth Bruffee, Stephen North, and Muriel Harris, to name a few, have made convincing pedagogical cases for using peers in the teaching of writing, specifically in writing centers. Hawkins has established the effectiveness of peer tutors in "providing a vital link. . .between writer and audience which is often missing when students write only for teachers;" this link is the opportunity to speak on a discursive intellectual level where writers can learn the skills and judgment necessary to revise. The "unofficial closeness of the peer relationship," he says, opens up the academic code to inexperienced and insecure writers (Hawkins, 1980, 64-65). Unencumbered by the image and behavior of authority, the peer tutor can more easily establish a relationship of trust and collaboration with a writer who feels alienated or awkward in the face of academic language.

This process [and this is the point I would like to stress today] is particularly enhanced when tutors are actively recruited and selected to reflect the cultural, gender, and class diversity of the writing center clientele. [Here then are additional dimensions of my diversity metaphor.] Let me cite the University of Washington Writing Center experience as an example. Our Writing Center--the only one on a campus of 35,000--supports a large ethnic and disadvantaged student population admitted through the Educational Opportunity (EOP)/Affirmative Action Program (including Native American, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and economically disadvantaged white students). In the early years of the Center's history, although effective screening tools were developed and used--and some excellent tutors were hired--our tutor population reflected not the diversity of the students we served but rather mirrored the near cultural homogeneity of the English Department. During this period, cultural issues were discussed as an isolated one-time seminar topic. Also during this period, problems emerged resulting from cultural differences and insensitivity. An example can be seen through a short essay written by a very bright Chinese immigrant student during her freshman year:

> One time I brought my paper to writing center to revise. A lady came to help me. After I read each paragraph, she would let me stop and showed me where and how I might want to revise. However, I didn't understand what she said, so I could just look at her confusedly. I felt embarrassed for my stupidity. When I looked into her eyes, I couldn't help feeling that there was sympathy or ridicule in her eyes. I almost could hear her voice saying, "Poor girl, she does not understand English at all; how can she expect herself to graduate from this university?" As for what she explained to me, it was like a bubble; everytime I tried to catch its meaning, it broke and nothing left. I didn't feel comfortable, so I quickly finished reading my paper, and fled away. Later I revised the paper anyway, mostly by my own opinions. (Kao)

Over the last three and a half years, we have moved from hiring any applicant with a strong writing background, to making a concerted effort to

draw tutors who are not only interested in writing, but who also reflect the ethnically and economically diverse clientele that we serve among the EOP population. In addition to general campus-wide recruitment, we solicit referrals from the English Dept TAs who teach EOP writing sections, as well as encourage good writers who work with us in the Writing Center to return as peer tutors. As a result of these efforts, the tutor contingent this year is completely multi-ethnic in composition, with half of the tutors recruited from the EOP population and over 80% of them representing different non-European ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Training

Recruitment, however, is just the beginning. After we succeed in recruiting a diverse group of tutors, our responsibility intensifies. The training of these tutors not only must expand on their knowledge of the writing process and the steps towards a writer's independence, but it also must expose them to an awareness of their own world-views and those of their clients and colleagues. Teaching them about writing is somewhat easier than the second charge. Let me go back to the UW example. Following the direction of North, Hawkins, Bruffee, Irene Clark, Thomas Reigstad, Laurence Podis, and others, we do discuss the theoretical underpinnings of tutoring and writing as well as the application of theory to actual practice in Writing Center conferences. Our conferencing method, described fully by my colleague Virginia Chappell in the Writing Lab Newsletter of February, 1982, is based on a concept which she calls "Hands Off!"--one in which tutors literally keep "hands off" the students' papers, leaving writers to maintain authorship of and authority over their own texts. To foster the willingness to grant the writer this authority,

tutors need to develop a sensitivity and respect for diverse experience—their own as well as that of their students.

Thus, our discussions on cultural and empowerment issues have become extremely important in our weekly training seminars. For this topic, however, the existing body of literature seems to be smaller. Although it is dangerous to generalize about the academic experience of any one group, cultural and learning differences must be acknowledged and celebrated for mutual respect to develop and this must be done on an on-going basis. Acknowledging the hazards of sweeping generalizations, then, we discuss cultural and learning issues related to native and non-native speakers of Hispanic, Black, Native American and Asian American backgrounds. We balance such cultural theories with discussions of actual conferencing situations so that we can appreciate individual differences within a given theoretical framework. For example, in discussing the "hands off" approach mentioned earlier, we explore how different Asian students might and do respond given their various cultural and learning orientations.

Benefits

In my experience, the results of this active recruitment of a multi-ethnic tutor group and a head-on confrontation with matters of cultural difference and alienation have been more than rewarding.

For the Writing Center and student clientele: Our peer tutors bring fresh and insightful perspectives—many because of their diverse backgrounds--especially when they are encouraged to voice them. Second, they offer a strong sense of sharing and a sense of social commitment: several tutors had benefited greatly from use of the Writing Center in previous quarters and have wanted to return the benefit to other EOP

students. Once they make that commitment, they stay; previously we had more flux in the tutor population with students coming and going after a quarter. A third benefit to the Writing Center is the sense of mutuality? and community--both among the tutors and with students--that crosses ethnic lines. In many instances, tutors work "beyond the call of duty," staying after hours to help fellow students simply because they are needed.

Fourth, a diverse tutor group can provide a sensitivity to the writer's experience often missing in the near homogeneous classrooms of large universities. Tutors and writers may share common cultural or classroom experiences despite other differences: for example, Sederis, a young Black woman, majoring in communications, has been working two jobs, taking a full course load, and tutoring. In her journal, she writes

> I helped an older Black lady for 2 1/2 hours. . . . she needed help with organization. . . .
>
> After I began to help her, I realized her topic would take a lot of talking: the Black Church and its impact on the Black Community.
>
> Her name was Celestine and she was originally from South Carolina. She reminded me of some of my people at home (Georgia), so I did not feel exasperated after our 2 1/2 hour session. I suppose I was a bit partial to her topic. The "hands off" method was ineffective at first because she would not trust my opinions. She kept mentioning how young I looked, and then she would say, "Don't just agree with me. If something is wrong I want you to tell me," assuming she could intimidate (me). . . . As our conferencing drew to a close, I had her writing, thinking, and arguing as opposed to merely reporting. Two hours is a long time, but when she left with an outline and a solid introduction, I had a good sense of accomplishment. I am sure she felt the same way. (Wright)

The fifth and, possibly, the most important benefit in this context is that the very presence of such a multi-ethnic tutor group addresses the issue of authority particularly in terms of ethnicity and class: within the Writing Center—for staff as well as students--there is visible evidence that students of different cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds can work together towards a common goal of empowerment. For student writers, a

diverse group of tutors can collectively serve as role models suggesting the possibility of success within "the system."

For the tutors' part, the rewards are equally invaluable. In her article "The Peer Tutor as Principal Benefactor in the Writing Center," Elizabeth Bell has outlined benefits to tutors in general (Bell, 1985). However, for tutors from culturally diverse backgrounds, working within a culturally sensitized environment, the rewards extend far beyond her discussion: For one thing, as tutors develop practical skills in student-centered education, they are learning skills that empower and that can only benefit others they work with in their careers as teachers, engineers, attorneys, physicians, etc. Karen, a Caucasian graduate student in English, who is finishing her MA degree, writes

> This is the second time in my life where I, a pure white Anglo-Saxon, have been a minority; and it has taken some adjustment. Our very first training seminar challenged my intentions in tutoring when we discussed the connotations behind "help" and "helping." I wanted to tutor because I wanted to help students be better writers. I now know that to strongly independent students "can I help you?" can suggest a hierarchy and a superiority that I don't intend to suggest. . . . I will be a high school teacher in less than a year. I know I will take a greater sensitivity toward the minority experience into my classroom. I will bring in an attitude that recognizes the validity and richness of varied world views and cultural patterns. I am learning how to incorporate, not eradicate, this diversity. (Witham)

Secondly, tutors may discover and define their own world views: In a recent seminar, Laura, a junior English and Anthropology major, whose mother is Korean and father Anglo, said:

> I grew up so Caucasian, yet I am now starting to appreciate the Korean side of me. (Henderson)

Thirdly, tutors in such a setting can come to understand themselves in relation to the academic world: Donna, a graduating senior in English and Woman's Studies, whose father was Japanese and mother Caucasian, is herself

a mother of two children, and spent many years in a small village in Southeast Alaska. In her journal, she writes:

I've had to look at myself really closely since I've come to the UW. You notice things after a while: how you are different, how you are not, what areas you find more interesting, etc.

I've thought and talked about this topic from time to time, but I've never realized how it affected me so personally till now; that is, issues pertaining to class background. Somehow, the group of tutors we have now, have made me focus on this more. I think we have many similar experiences between us, but there are differences as well--class background . . . is one.

It's been really hard for me to value my background. As you know, I come from a lower (maybe lower middle) class background. I think this has definitely made a difference in my inability to survive here at the UW or, as you have touched on before, understand the language of academia. Yes, I'm making it now, but my lack of academic skills has also been painfully clarified; not an easy thing to become aware of I'm afraid--especially since wealth and higher class ideals are more valued here [at the university]. One thing I will never be able to change is my past and the person I am today as a result.

The value I have retained, however, and one I hope always to retain is the fact that I can respect all people regardless of financial status, appearance, or academic knowledge . . . . And I have feared losing that (humble) attitude. As you know, there are plenty of profs here who sorely lack that value.

In light of all this, I sometimes think that intellectualism is merely an excuse for having feelings. It's a way to validate what one feels to be important--or the only way to get validation from society about what one feels is important--at least my academic struggle has been, in part, about that.

Yes--knowledge is important, I'm not saying it isn't--but I sometimes think academics take on the air of religious fanaticism in believing that it is the only valuable way to develop one's life or awareness. I believe this is false. There are many other ways to develop mentally or in personal awareness that are just as valuable. (Bolima)

Ultimately, peer tutors develop a self-esteem, insight and confidence, which, in turn, make them more effective facilitators of collaborative, reciprocal relationships with the students they tutor. In another observation, Donna writes

Overall, as a tutor, I have gained a lot of personal confidence and skill through the tutor training program. . . . I have had the opportunity to see how cultural diversity makes a difference in writing--but not in writing ability, and have been able to become more sensitive to these students' needs. (Bolima)

John Rouse in "The Politics of Composition," discusses the teaching of English--much in the manner of Paulo Freire--as "a political act," one in which the English teacher chooses or does not choose to socialize students in a manner politically acceptable to mainstream society (Rouse, 1979, 1). In encouraging these tutors and students to become writers of their own thoughts and experiences, we as "English teachers" can better fulfill our responsibility in altering the relationship of the culturally and linguistically different writer to the academic world. We cannot continue simply to expect conformity or to perpetuate feelings of "outlandishness." These students must succeed in higher education not despite their diversity but because of it. Using these differences productively--acknowledging the diversity among our students, recognizing the value of peer tutors from different cultural/linguistic backgrounds, and working with them, in turn, to encourage the self-expression of their peers can be a liberating first step.

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Okawa, p. 12

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